DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 326 627 CE 056 344

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TITLE What Motivates Adults To Participate in the Federal Adult Basic Education Program? Research on Adult Basic Education. Number 1 in Series of 3.
INSTITUTION Iowa State Dept. of Education, Des Moines.
PUB DATE Feb 90
NOTE 3p.; For related documents, see ED 290 048 and CE 056 346.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Aspiration; *Adult Basic Education; Adult Literacy; *Adult Students; *Learning Motivation; Literacy Education; Participation; Student Attitudes; *Student Motivation; *Student Needs
IDENTIFIERS Iowa

ABSTRACT

Learners' motivations for participating in adult basic education (ABE) are important; determining their needs is crucial to evaluating programs to see if their needs are being met and is also important in determining instructional content and methods. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 323 randomly selected ABE students in Iowa. During the interviews, students were asked to rate the personal applicability of 62 motivational statements derived from earlier interviews with ABE students. Ratings were subjected to factor analysis, and the following 10 distinct motivational factors were identified: educational advancement, self-improvement, literacy development, community and church involvement, economic need, family responsibilities, diversions (or enrichment), job advancement, launching a new life, and urging of others. The research concluded that there is no single, typical ABE student and that ABE needs to meet the needs of this diverse group. (KC)

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Research on

ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

February 1990 Number 1 in Series of 3

ED326627

What Motivates Adults to Participate in the Federal Adult Basic Education Program?

As opinion leaders in both the public and private sectors increasingly come to view adult illiteracy as a fundamental social problem in our country, ever-increasing attention is focused upon America's largest single adult literacy effort: The federally sponsored Adult Basic Education (ABE) program. It has been nearly twenty-five years since the establishment of the federal ABE effort, and during that time, millions of adult Americans have participated in local programs throughout the country. Yet, partly because of the diversity of local programs and of the learners who choose to attend them, and partly because of the absence of widescale research efforts, very little is known about the reasons why over three million adults choose to participate in programs every year.

Why Learners' Motivations Are Important

Understanding the motivations of ABE participants is important for three major reasons. First, the federal legislation guiding ABE requires each state to document the needs of learners and to demonstrate how those needs are being met. The basic motivations of participants represent one important indicator of such needs. ABE students' expressed motivations describe the ways in which adult learners hope to change their lives through ABE, and thus are suggestive of the needs they perceive in their own lives. Second, by understanding the motivations of ABE students, teachers and administrators will be better able to design programs responsive to students' needs. Knowledge of how adults wish to apply newly developed skills in their out-of-school lives can serve as a solid basis for the many decisions ABE educators need to make – decisions about instructional content, teaching methods, and program recruitment strategies. Third, the ever increasing emphasis on job-related skills has become so intense in recent years that adult basic education administrators and policy-makers might lose sight of the fact that ABE programs always have had – and hopefully always will have – the capacity to meet a variety of needs, some of which are vocational and some of which are not. The findings reported here can serve as a timely reminder that ABE – like elementary education, secondary education, and liberal higher education – is a means to many diverse ends.

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Research Approach

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 323 randomly selected ABE students throughout the state of Iowa. During the interviews, students were asked to rate the personal applicability of 62 motivational statements – all of which were derived from earlier, semi-structured interviews with ABE students. These ratings were then subjected to factor analysis, a statistical procedure that allows for the recognition of patterns of co-variation in data and thereby – in the present research – allowed the researchers to infer basic motivational forces, or "factors," that underlie students' responses to the 62 statements.

Ten Factors of Motivation

Ten distinct motivational factors were identified. They are described here roughly in their order of importance to the overall ABE population.

1. Educational Advancement. The first motivational factor was educational advancement. This factor is represented by the statements "I want to prove to myself that I can finish school," "I want to get a high school diploma," and "I want to go to college." This factor suggests that adult students view ABE programs as a re-entry point into the American educational system, a chance to complete the education they had previously abandoned, and as a first step to further education.

2. Self Improvement. This factor consists of many statements that have intangible and intrinsic – as opposed to instrumental and extrinsic – ends. Through this factor, learners indicated a desire to "feel better about myself," "be more intelligent," "have more control over my life," and "have more confidence in myself." This factor suggests that ABE students – like voluntary adult learners at all educational levels – have a profound belief in the power of education to increase their personal effectiveness and improve their self esteem.

3. Literacy Development. The third motivational factor cuts to the heart of ABE: the development of reading, writing, and speaking skills. Unlike the highest ranked factor, Educational Advancement, which is concerned with formal movement through the educational system, this factor deals with the development of the fundamental skills that contribute to success in adult life – both inside and outside the educational system.

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4. Community and Church Involvement. This factor is best represented by five statements: "I want to help more in my church," "I want to be able to read the Bible better," "I want to know more about how the government works," "I want to be a smarter voter," and "I want to be more active in my community." This factor can serve as a reminder that ABE students are full-blown, proactive, adult members of American society – unlike the unflattering depictions of isolated and incompetent "illiterates" created by the popular media – who wish to improve their ability to participate in community and spiritual activities.

5. Economic Need. The fifth motivational factor points to the need to gain employment. It is best represented by four statements: "I need to earn more money," "I'm unemployed and need to find work," "I want to enter job training," and "I want to get off welfare." Through this factor, students express their belief that ABE will improve their ability to find employment and increase their incomes.

6. Family Responsibilities. This factor indicates ABE students' desire to improve, not only their own lives, but the lives of their family members. The factor is best represented by four statements: "I want to set a better example for my children," "I need to be a better parent," "I want to be better able to help my children with their homework," and "I want to be better at taking care of my family." Through such statements, adult students suggest a belief in the power of ABE to break the cycle of undereducation that often runs in families.

7. Diversion. This factor, which was rated most highly by older students, suggests that some learners participate in ABE, not for its instrumental value, but because it represents a constructive way to spend one's time. In this factor, the reasons given for participation are "because I had nothing better to do," "because I wanted to try something new," "because I wanted to meet people," and "because I was bored with my life." These motivations suggest that, for some participants, ABE is regarded in much the same light as the "enrichment" or "recreational" education courses offered in many American communities.

8. Job Advancement. This motivational factor pertains to those ABE students who are already employed. The motivational statements for this factor indicate a desire "to do my job better," "to get promoted on my job," and "to get a better job." It indicates a belief in the power of education – and perhaps of educational credentialling – in career advancement.

9. Launching into a New Life. This factor, which was most highly rated by very young ABE students, reveals that participation in ABE can be timed to complement other important life events – especially for those moving from adolescence to adulthood. The statements representing this factor all seem to have a youthful voice: "I expect to get married soon," "I expect to have a child soon," "I want to move out of the place where I now live," "I need to be able to prevent people from taking advantage of me," and "Other people don't respect me."

10. Urging of Others. The last factor reveals the influence of ABE students' friends, families, and co-workers on the decision to participate. The three statements representing this factor are "My friends urged me to attend this class," My family urged me to attend this class," and "People at work urged me to attend this class."

Conclusions

The motivations uncovered in this research say a lot about the value that adult learners place on literacy – and on the ABE programs designed to help them achieve it. Eight of the ten motivational factors (excluding Diversion and Urging of Others) speak of the aspirations of ABE students and, more importantly from an educational planning standpoint, about the ways in which they want to put literacy and education to work in their lives. It is clear, both from the work reported here and from subsequent analyses reported in the full research report, that there is no single, typical ABE student. Adult learners come from many walks of life, express a diversity of motivations, and display an array of life styles. The strength of ABE to date has been its ability to adapt and respond to diverse student needs. One can only hope that the current interest in workplace and job-related literacy – an unquestionably important aspect of the total literacy education effort, but only one aspect – does not reduce ABE's ability to deal with the other quality-of-life issues represented by the full array of student motivations reported here.

- Thomas Valentine
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The research project on which this summary is based was funded under section 353 of the Adult Education Act. The project was directed by Jane Sellen of Western Iowa Tech and managed by John Hartwig of the Iowa Department of Education. The research itself was designed and implemented by Hal Beder of Rutgers University and Thomas Valentine of the University of Georgia. The full research report is available through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service under the call number ED 290 048. For more information, write to:

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